

Chapter 1: Project History

1.1 Project Description

The US 31 Improvement Project is located in Hamilton County, Indiana between I-465 (north leg) and SR 38, a distance of approximately 12.5 miles. (Figure 1.1-1). The project traverses the City of Carmel, Clay Township, the Town of Westfield, and Washington Township. Interstate 465 was designated as the southern project terminus because it represents a major origin and destination point for US 31. SR 38 was designated as the northern project terminus because it represented the next significant east-west arterial that intersected with US 31 north of Westfield. In addition, traffic patterns and volumes on US 31 along with land use and roadway characteristics change significantly beyond these termini. As such, this segment of US 31 has “independent utility”. Due to the potential for construction and easement impacts, the area of study extended beyond the termini south, approximately one-quarter mile, to 96th Street and north, approximately one-half mile, to 216th Street.

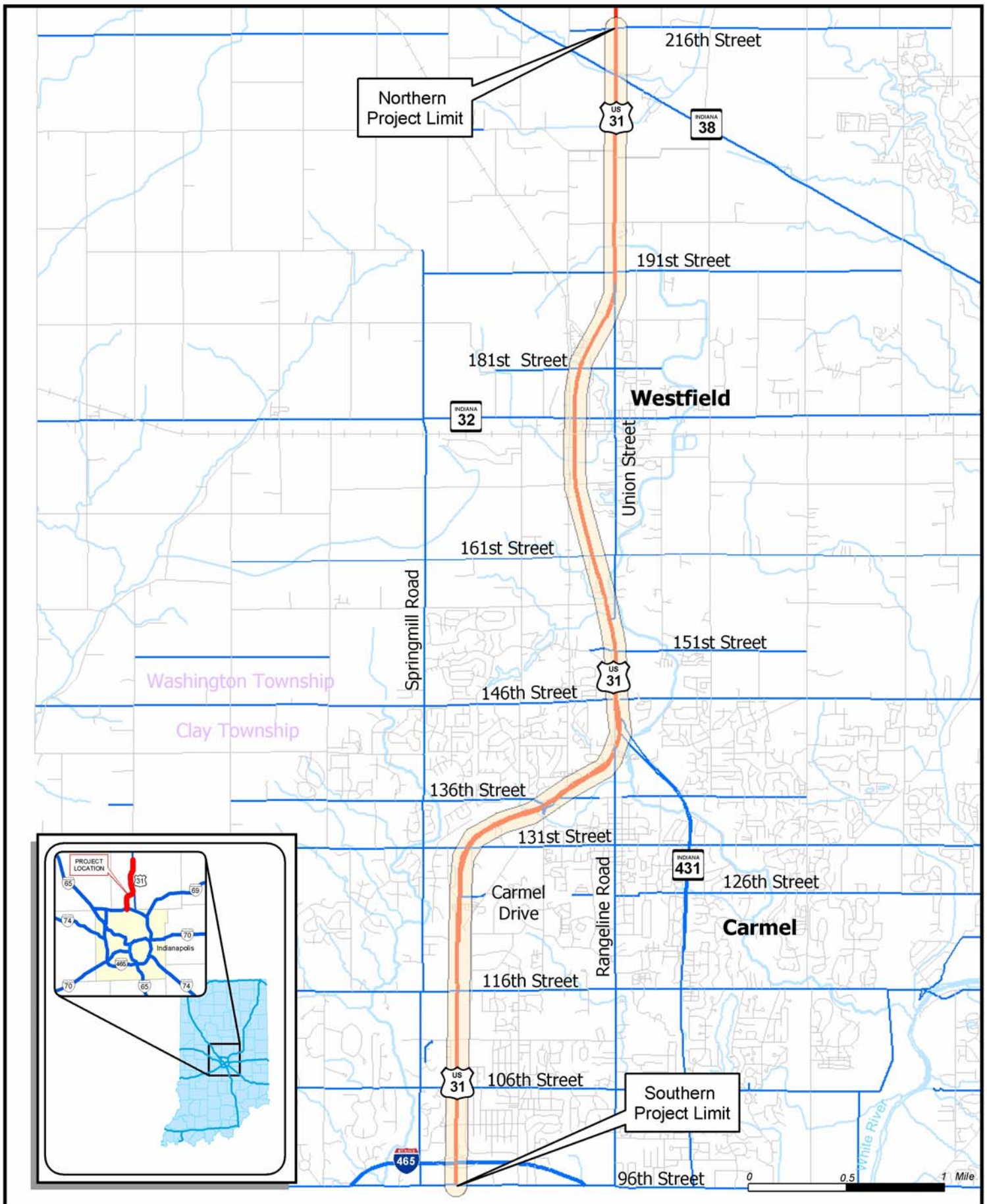
The existing US 31 facility is a four-lane (six lanes between I-465 and 106th Street), divided roadway with limited access right-of-way and at-grade intersections. It is classified as an Urban Other Principal Arterial. There are currently 15 signalized and seven unsignalized intersections along US 31 within the project area and interchanges with SR 431 and I-465. Direct driveways or private access is prohibited south of SR 431. Although access is also controlled (as limited access right-of-way) north of SR 431, there are still several private properties that have direct access to US 31. In general, however, access to the facility is limited primarily to major intersections, with spacing of one-half to one mile. Travel lanes are 12 feet in width and are bordered by an 11-foot paved outside shoulder and a 1.4-foot paved inside shoulder. The through travel lanes are separated by a 50 to 60 foot wide median. Right turn and left turn auxiliary lanes exist along US 31 at all major intersections. The typical existing right-of-way width is 145 feet each side of the centerline south of 146th Street and 87 feet each side of the centerline north of 146th Street.

In general, the land use in the southern portion of the US 31 corridor is dominated by office/business development while the northern portion is dominated by agricultural land, especially north of Westfield. Commercial and residential developments along with forested areas are widely scattered throughout the corridor.

This Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the US 31 Improvement Project has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969; Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) Procedural Manual for Preparing Environmental Studies, Indiana’s Streamlined EIS Procedures; and, the US Environmental Protection Agencies (EPA), Early Coordination Comments on INDOT’s US 31 Proposal, dated February 23, 2001.

1.2 Transportation Planning History

US 31 is currently designated as a Statewide Mobility Corridor from Indianapolis (I-465) to South Bend (US 20), a distance of approximately 122 miles, in the INDOT 2000-2025 Long Range Plan. The objectives of these corridors are to provide safe, free flowing, high-speed connections between metropolitan areas of Indiana and other states. US 31 is also part of the National Highway System (NHS) and Indiana’s 4R Road Network.



Base Map Source: Hamilton County, Indiana

Figure 1.1-1
Project Location

Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Hamilton County, Indiana

The need for improvements in the US 31 corridor has also been identified in regional and local transportation plans. The Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) has endorsed, as a part of its 2025 Regional Transportation Plan, an upgrade of US 31 to a multi-lane, divided freeway between I465 and SR 38. In addition, Westfield and Washington Township have adopted into their 2020 Comprehensive Plan an upgrade of US 31 to a grade-separated facility.

The City of Carmel and Clay Township 20-year Thoroughfare Plan identifies US 31 as a freeway. Both the City of Carmel and the Town of Westfield have adopted US 31 Overlay Zone ordinances so as not to preclude possible future improvements to US 31 and to ensure land use compatibility.

1.3 Project History

In 1991, the Indiana General Assembly passed Indiana Code (IC) 8-23-8-1.3, calling for the determination of “Commerce Corridors” within Indiana, which is defined in IC 8-23-1-14.5 as:

“That part of a recognized system of highways that: (1) directly facilitates intrastate, interstate, or international commerce and travel; (2) enhances economic vitality and international competitiveness; or, (3) provides service to all parts of Indiana and the United States.”

IC 8-23-8-1.3 also called for the determination of “the level of service of each Commerce Corridor” and the establishment of “procedures for maintaining the level of service in a Commerce Corridor.” Furthermore, it called for the adoption of “an improvement plan for each Commerce Corridor that does not meet its prescribed level of service”.

In the same year (1991), the Indiana General Assembly also passed Noncode Act (NCA) 1991-87-5 § 5 stating the following:

“The Indiana department of transportation shall undertake, as soon as possible, studies that will be required to improve the transportation corridor between St. Joseph County and Marion County. The department shall conduct an origin-destination study and may study the following: (1) Any changes needed in the location of transportation facilities to improve the corridor; and, (2) The environmental impact of changes in the corridor. The department may include the impact of using recycled materials to make changes in the corridor in determining environmental impact under this subdivision.”

In 1993, INDOT commissioned its first study of US 31 in Hamilton County covering the section between I-465 and 196th Street. This Major Investment Study (MIS), completed in 1997, evaluated a wide variety of options to improve the US 31 corridor, including new alignments. Its final recommendation called for an upgrade of the existing US 31 facility to urban freeway standards and the addition of travel lanes. The recommended upgrade designated a series of interchanges at major arterials within the corridor.

The 1995 policy plan, *Transportation in Indiana* (INDOT), defined a system of “Commerce Corridors.” Several of these corridors were identified for further study. Following the 1995 plan, INDOT began work on the Major Corridor Investment Benefit Analysis System (MCIBAS), which included the US 31 corridor.

In August of 1998, INDOT and the Indiana Transportation Finance Authority (ITFA) authorized a preliminary feasibility study of the potential of upgrading US 31 between Indianapolis and South Bend to a full, limited-access, grade-separated toll highway. The objective of the study was to determine the financial, economic and engineering feasibility of establishing a new toll highway in the US 31 corridor. The study concluded that a supplemental revenue source would be required to make a US 31 toll facility feasible.

In April of 2000, INDOT began the NEPA process for preparing an Environmental Impact Statement for the US 31 Improvement Project. As a part of this project, a *Purpose and Need Statement* was issued in May of 2001 and the *US 31 Preliminary Alternatives Analysis and Screening Report* was issued in July of 2002.

According to INDOT's 2000-2025 Long Range Plan, "Statewide Mobility Corridors serve as the connection between major metropolitan areas of the state and neighboring states, provide macro-level accessibility to cities and regions around the state, and play a vital role in the economic development of the state. These corridors are the top-end of the highway system and are meant to provide mobility across the state. They provide safe, free flowing, high-speed connections between the metropolitan areas of the state and surrounding states. They serve as the freight arteries of the state and are thus vital for economic development. INDOT has a strategic goal to directly connect metropolitan areas of 25,000 population or greater." (Figure 1.1-2)

In February 2001, the Indiana General Assembly passed Senate Bill Number 31 (SB 31), a series of amendments to IC 8-23. The first of these amendments changes the name of "Commerce Corridors" to "Statewide Mobility Corridors."

As well, SB 31 added Section 4 to IC 8-23-8-1.3, which states that "The department of transportation shall designate US Highway 31 from Interstate Highway 465 in Hamilton County to the US Highway 20 bypass in St. Joseph's County as a pilot project for the development of a corridor preservation program. (b) The pilot project must determine the most cost effective means by which the Department of Transportation can fulfill the requirements of IC 8-23-8-1.3. (c) The department of transportation shall give priority consideration to the implementation of the results of the pilot project on US Highway 31 from Interstate Highway 465 in Hamilton County to the US Highway 20 bypass in St. Joseph's County and other Statewide Mobility Corridors designated under IC 8-23-8-1.3."

Figure 1.1-2

Statewide Mobility Connections between Population Centers

